DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 144 CS 506 059

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TITLE Of Escape Goats and Communication Training.
PUB DATE [87]
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; *Educational Change; Interpersonal Communication; *Language Arts; *Language Usage; Secondary Education; Speech Communication; Speech Instruction; Standard Spoken Usage; *Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS Communication Accuracy

ABSTRACT

As a result of the neglect of verbal training in the public schools, students, community members, and even some teachers are using words capriciously and often incorrectly. If this trend continues, words will cease to have precise meanings, and thus cease to be conveyors of thought, expression, and philosophies. It is up to educators to reverse this trend and redouble their energies in the area of verbal training. The back to basics movement (teaching vocabulary, for example) is a good beginning, but it does not go far enough; communication skills ought to be a priority in school systems and ought to be taught in a systematic way, so that the need for offering remedial English courses in college and in business organizations would diminish. (ARH)

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OF ESCAPE GOATS AND COMMUNICATION TRAINING

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OF ESCAPE GOATS AND COMMUNICATION TRAINING

A while ago I walked into a pizzeria and requested a small pie with cheese and mushrooms. The proprietor quickly and belligerently responded by telling me that they had no small pies-just medium and large ones.

I was surprised at this. I was unsure then, and am unsure now, how a medium pizza pie could surface without there being both a small and large one. There could be an American Pizza Association which posits that pies of five inches in diameter must be labeled small, those seven inches, medium, and those nine inches or more, large. I doubt this, however.

Therefore I wondered, and asked the salesperson how there could be a medium pie without a small pie. He looked at me as if he had indeed listened to some strange queries in his time-perhaps requests for pizza without cheese, or without sauce, or maybe even orders just for the crust-but he had never heard anybody question the validity of the sizing and selling of only medium and large pies.

"Hey", he said, "All we got is medium and large pies. You wanna small pie go someplace else. Whaddaya want, trouble?"

I ordered the medium pie, not without a final protest, declaring that the pie was a small pie despite his claims to the contrary. The man simply muttered, "Four bucks," and that was that.

Perhaps this is a rather insignificant incident. Certainly at a time of international terrorism the exchange seems little more than an amusing anecdote. However, the dialogue in the pizzeria is more than just amusing, because it illustrates a trend in language usage which has created a genuine problem.

I'm not a prig. That must be made clear. This piece is not a piggy back ride on the back of Edwin Newman. I found Newman's Strictly Speaking to be priggish. It seemed nitpicky and I'm not punctilious for the sake of adherence to antediluvian etiquette. However, I am concerned with language and the importance of language as our vehicle for expressing ideas.

My exchange at the pizzeria was, unfortunately, not particularly rare. The proprietor's usage and, I imagine, his philosophy of language usage is consistent with many others' and is most consistent with the usage of many of our students. As teachers we have the responsibility to recognize this problem and deal with it in a direct way. I argue in this piece for a redoubling of our energies in the

area of verbal training. Moreover, I argue that training in Communication skills ought to be a priority in school systems and be taught in a systematic way.

Perhaps a residue of the late sixties and early seventies move toward progressive relevant education was a deemphasis in the area of verbal training. As most of us are aware, Verbal SAT scores dropped considerably in the seventies and early eighties indicating that, for whatever reasons, students were not as verbal as they had been in previous years. It seemed that meticulous attention to words and word meanings took a back seat during this era. Getting the "general idea" became important. More than once I have heard students comment, "It doesn't matter what you say as long as you can get the general idea across."

The proprietor of the pizzeria could have certainly argued that I had gotten the general idea. There were, after all, two sizes, medium and large and therefore one was the smaller of the two. Thought the attendant, "He surely should be able to figure that out."

Indeed I did get the general idea, and yes, I had been able to "figure it out." Yet there is something insidious about "getting the general idea" and the general idea philosophy. In the "pizza case" for example, conveying the "general idea" facilitates diluting the value and meaning of the word "medium."

Consider the following examples of student (written and oral) statements. In each case the receiver probably got the general idea.

1."The speaker I heard was quite boring. In order to improve he should have told more jokes and antidotes."

2."Although Mr. Barnett spoke well, his audience did not perceive him to be knowledgeable because he didn't have an etiquette appearance."

3."It is unfortunate but true that Jews, throughout the centuries, have been used as escape goats."

4."I like acting okay. Acting for me is, um, like breathing okay. It's just what I need for the, you know, job fulfillment type of thing we all need, okay."

5."It was apparent that Dr. Wagner was nervous. He stammered occasionally and continually grasped onto the lectern and used it for a crotch."

This is the distillate of the ideas syndrome. Students, pizza proprietors, and even some teachers use words capriciously and often incorrectly. If words cease to have precise meaning they will cease to be the conveyors of thought, expression, and philosophies.

It is an educational challenge to reverse this trend. To some extent, there already has been a reversal. The back to basics movement espoused, at least, a dismissal of ethereal approaches to learning and the return to "basics"- teaching vocabulary, for example. It will take a while

before educators can accurately assess the success of this "movement."

I suggest, in addition, that another element become part of our rededication to verbal training. I suggest that we systematically include Communication skills instruction in our curriculums.

Recently, I conducted an informal study of public schools in Western New York attempting to assess the nature of Communication training at these schools.1 The responses indicated that Communication was not taught on any regular basis. Some respondents wrote that there were extra curricular debate programs at their schools. Others responded by writing that the school offered elective courses in public speaking for seniors. Some others commented that Communication training was "incorporated" into their "regular" offerings.2 Western New York is not atypical. Whereas Mathematics, Reading, and Writing have justifiably been labeled, basic, Communication and Speech training has never been accorded this status.3

The implicit rationale for this seems to have been that people/students already know how to speak.4 Students have had to speak and listen all their lives and, therefore, they've somehow acquired the skills necessary for successful communication. After all, we all have tongues and ears. This logic concludes by deducing that Communication training is not crucial as it is, essentially, superfluous.

If this reasoning were correct there would be no need for the numbers of "Bonehead English" courses taught in colleges and in many organizations. Corporate Communication consultants do quite well, "consulting" in such sophisticated areas as basic speaking and simple composition. The reason why many advertisements for corporate positions indicate that applicants must have "Excellent Communication Skills" is not because the jobs require the skills of a Martin Luther King or a William Jennings Bryan, but because so many applicants can't string three sentences together without including a mantra of "er-ah-um-youknow."

The residue of thinking that students do not need systematic Communication training are our graduates who request more jokes and "antidotes" from their teachers, and others who aspire to speak "etiquettely". This thinking also accounts for the gurgling of countless "You knows" "Ums" "ers" by assorted professionals; the legion of elongated "ands" which indiscriminately connect unrelated sentences; as well as pizza proprietors who can't fathom the nuances of "medium."

Certainly, we have tongues and we do speak but that does not mean we all speak well. We all have feet and we all can kick, but few of us can play soccer as well as we might if we'd trained with a soccer team. We all have fingers and the hands those fingers are connected to, but we all needed to learn how to write and then we had to work with instructors to hone these writing skills.

Simply we need training and exercise to develop our physical potential.

The word medium does not mean small. Scapegoat should not be transmogrified into a two word utterance. "You knows" should not be pervasive in communications to the extent that listeners tend to focus in on and (in some cases) count the number of interjections, as opposed to listening to the subject matter. Language and communication are two very valuable, powerful tools. As Jean Paul Sartre wrote, "Words are loaded bullets."

Unfortunately too many of our students are shooting blanks. It is we educators who face the challenge of changing that.

ENDNOTES

1. The study consisted of a survey which was mailed to principals of elementary, middle, and senior high schools in Western New York. The survey contained a series of open ended questions regarding the nature and extent of Communication courses offered at the schools.

2. In addition, a number of respondents called me and told me honestly that they did not know what Communication courses might be.

3. Dorothy Higginbotham in her article "On the Total Elementary School Speech Program" writes "Unlike reading, art, mathematics, science, or social studies, no clearly defined area of instruction in the elementary school curriculum can be consistently identified as 'speech'[communication]." Although Higginbotham's article is dated (1971)the same conclusions have been drawn in recent years. Pamela Cooper in Activities for Teaching Speaking and Listening: Grades 7-12, writes on the first page of the book "Although oral communication- both speaking and listening- often determines a person's educational, vocational, and social success, American education has typically neglected formal instruction in oral communication." I suggest that interested readers see the Higginbotham article which appears in On Teaching Speech in Elementary and Junior High Schools. The book is edited by Jeffrey Auer and Edward Jenkinson and published by Indiana University Press. In addition interested readers should see the "Speech Communication Association Guidelines[:] Speaking and Listening Competencies For High School Graduates." These guidelines are available from the Speech Communication Association central offices in Annandale, VA.

4. Again, this is documented in the Higginbotham article and Cooper book. See page two in the Cooper book and pages four and five in the Higginbotham article. In addition, I have had occasion to informally discuss this with elementary school teachers and principals. They either voice this argument or bemoan the fact that this argument is voiced by others.

SOURCES

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